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REAT and urgent has become the necessity of supplying the intellectual wants of the population; and many thanks are due to Mr. William Ewart, M.P. (to whom the public are already greatly indebted for originating previous important inquiries connected with the cognate subjects of literature and art), for the recent Parliamentary inquiry as to the best means of extending the establishment of libraries freely open to the public.

The rudimental education of the people, in the fulfilment of its great purpose, has of late years been exciting intellectual wants,—opening wide, book-eating, hungry mental mouths throughout the country; and a necessity has arisen to provide the wherewithal to satisfy these healthy appetites. "For the last many years in England everybody has been educating the people, but they have forgotten to find them any books."* In byegone times, to be sure, the little musty old parochial libraries, which still lie scattered in dusty holes and corners throughout the country, did constitute a *supply* that even exceeded the *demand*. But then the essential preliminary process of *exciting* a demand by the general education of the people had scarcely been dreamt of, except indeed in Scotland, where "a respect for education and reading, long fostered by the ancient and excellent system of instruction by means of parochial schools, is hereditary." Of late years, however, both England and Scotland have made rapid progress in the initiative that now demands a further step in sequence, to be taken towards the fulfilment of that end towards which the spread of school-education was but a means.

The whole of the evidence recently adduced proves one thing clearly,—that "the qualifications of the people to appreciate and enjoy such institutions" as those demanded, namely, free public libraries in every city, town, village, and hamlet in the empire, "are unquestionable." And, with the still growing increase of these very qualifications, there is also "abundant testimony to the fact of a vast and progressive improvement in the national habits and manners." Of the fitness of the people for the rational enjoyment and the moral and general benefit to be derived from public libraries, as observed, there can be no greater proof than their own independent efforts to create them; and wherever any favourable opportunity presents itself, there it very soon appears that the working classes are not to be satisfied with the mere manufacture of the cheap abridgment and extracted substance of knowledge—the milk, merely, as it were, of the secular "Word" in their souls. With mental appetites hale and hearty, they revolt at all such pap, and yearn for the "strong meat" of *men*, as their only nutritive intellectual viaticum. Nothing short of the whole range of science and literature, in short, will satisfy their inquiring minds, once fairly awake, with opportunity, to the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Although nothing new to us,—there is something that we are assured will astonish many, in the curious evidence adduced on this particular subject.

We are told, for instance, that some of the best-read men in Birmingham are working men, who are perfectly versant not only in history, politics, and literature generally, but in the sciences at large, and also in languages—such as the German and the French,—in all of which accomplishments, of course, they are self-taught;—that in Manchester there is a large class of operatives who are naturalists and members, curators, &c., of natural history societies, while there is also in the same place a curious set of 'working' botanists and entomologists, who make formal botanizing and entomological excursions;—that not only is Shakspeare in many instances known almost by heart, by working men, who can stand a cross-examination on any of his plays,—that not only do working men sustain a constant and fluent correspondence through the newspaper press on all sorts of subjects, and write 'poetry'—such as it may be—by the mile, on all sorts of subjects too,—but that there are many such men who constitute regular debating societies, or who dive even into and fully relish all the profundities of 'philosophy,' and are sworn disciples of Kant or Fichté, Schelling, or Hegel, or are warm admirers of Carlyle. And should it be asked, of what earthly use can some of such pursuits be to most of these wielders of the hammer or the shuttle, the chisel or the file, let us (leaving out higher arguments) whisper gently in response, that they all tend to calm political agitation and disturbance, ever fiercest in ferment where the only profundity of mind to fathom is that of its ignorance—that it has been proved in formal evidence, in short, that where there is a studious or reading temperament and habit, there, too, is the least possible liability to be played upon by the mere appeals of demagogues to the feelings: and certainly such a result, in these times of revolutionary warfare, is worth "a king's ransom" in itself, or at the very least it is worth a free public library in every centre of political agitation and disturbance. Nevertheless, we cannot but admit that, it may be, some may thus be only filled with self-sufficient empty notions ill befitting the contented steady exercise of their respective handicrafts or callings; but the self-sufficiency of ignorance is an evil ten thousand-fold more inveterate. It is a curious fact, for instance, that in mining districts the uninstructed miners may be got to attend at any series of lectures rather than those on mineralogy or geology. So is it in many other trades—there is an ignorant conceit in the way of knowledge hard to remove. The *reading* workman, on the other hand, in his eagerness to improve his mind, needs no stimulus from without. And even where without the advantage of a library, many are known to work extra hours for "book-money." This desire for reading is even beginning to display itself in the very "ragged schools," where books, especially on emigration, are perpetually thumbed and eagerly devoured with the deepest and most affecting interest.

It would be well, however, if the reading of the masses were at least all as little capable of producing positive mischief. But from the want of a national diffusion of good books in public libraries, instruction itself (we will not call it education) has in many instances done much evil by enabling the readers to peruse that never-ending flow of garbage, in the form of which, writers of even positive talent, and from whom better things might have been expected, are ever pandering, in some novelty of shape or other, to the basest feelings and passions of the million. In proportion as education increases, the facility of obtaining books corrective or preventive to such abomination, as well as to political dispeace and disturbance, ought to be increased and must be increased. And here is a field for the philanthropist, wide as that of ignorance itself, and even worse, in results; for ignorance may be consistent so far with rectitude of thought, feeling, and conduct, but *that* such false enlightenment can never be. Let every right-minded person then assist in this good cause as far as he can. The foundation of public libraries in every city, town, village, and hamlet throughout the empire would be a mighty good in many aspects, and it only remains for us to show how this, it is conceived, can best be done.

But first of a few statistical and other details of interest in connection with the purpose more immediately in view. And the report on which our present remarks are based is full of such details, presented both *viva voce* and in elaborate statements, tables, plans, &c., to the Committee, amongst which details we cannot resist a desire specially to allude to those by Mr. E. Edwards, of the British Museum, of whose ability and laborious industry we needed not these numerous and convincing proofs to be well assured.

Amongst the details is a curious map exhibiting the relative amount or provision of books in libraries publicly accessible in the principal states of Europe, as compared with their respective populations. The proportions are, to every 100 of the population in the British Isles and Holland, 63 to 53 books; in Russia and Portugal 80 to 76; in Belgium, Spain, and Sardinia, about 100; in France, 129; in the Italian States, 150; in the Austrian empire and Hungary, 167; in Prussia 200; in Sweden and Norway, 309; in Bavaria, 339; in Switzerland, 350; in Denmark, 412; and in the smaller German states, nearly 450!! Is it not sad to think that the British isles, which rank so high above all other states in other points of pre-eminence, are here the lowest of the low? These figures are black enough certainly, but the map, which is scored with black lines—close and numerous in proportion to the comparative paucity of books or—literary darkness, shall we say?—gives a still more glaring relief to our bad pre-eminence in this respect. The British isles are black as ink can make them—blacker than semi-barbarous Russia, while *the* one little bright spot, *par excellence*, is limited to the narrow outlines of the smaller German states.*

A heavy load of this disgrace, as might be anticipated, rests on poor Ireland. Amongst the details it is incidentally noted that there are 73 towns in Ireland without even a single bookseller, although the population of each averages 2,300! The priesthood are said to look with an evil eye on the diffusion of books of any class in Ireland. As for ourselves inclusive, there are 5,000,000 of us who cannot form even potbooks in writing. In a Norfolk parish of 400 people it was some few years since found absolutely necessary to elect a

* See Mr. George Dawson's evidence, p. 88, in Appendix to "Report from Select Committee on Public Libraries," &c., on which Report and Appendix the following remarks are based.

* From a table presented by Mr. Edwards, it appears that the average number of volumes published within Great Britain and Ireland during the last ten years was 3,139½ vols. per annum, and the average value £3,424. 1s. In Germany, about 11,000 separate works, including pamphlets, appear to have been issued during each of the last three years; and in France, 5,530 in 1847.

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